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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 174 (2015) 1057 – 1060

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

INTE 2014

Beyond the literal: Teaching visual literacy in the 21st century classroom

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Abstract

Visual imagery and composition inherently have the power to shape comprehension and interpretation beyond the literal. Today's students increasingly inundated with a steady stream of imagery from multimedia platforms including the Internet (i.e., social media – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), television, film and advertisements (White, 2012) are global consumers of media in their everyday lives yet they often lack the skills necessary to move beyond passive receivers of visual media messages. Visual literacy is vital for 21st Century learners and those who teach. Classrooms can become spaces for students to effectively communicate in and contribute to analytical and global dialogue for discussions of race and diversity, multicultural life and history thus encouraging students to become active deconstructionists of visual grammar.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University

Keywords: Visual Literacy; Critical Analysis

1. Introduction

Contemporary culture is a visual culture and has become increasingly dependent on the capacity to communicate instantly and universally. As visual images become the predominant form of communication across a

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.794

wide range of formats visual imagery and composition inherently have the power to shape our comprehension and the interpretation of our world beyond the literal.

Today's students are now global consumers of media and visual grammar. In their everyday lives they are increasingly inundated with a steady stream of imagery from multimedia platforms including the Internet (i.e., social media – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) as well as television, film and advertisements (White, 2012). However they often lack the skills necessary to move beyond passive receivers of visual media messages.

One could ask of teachers of 21st century college students what kind of student do they want? The best answer would be -- a visually literate person. To be visually literate, a person should be able to read and use visual language including the ability to successfully decode, interpret and evaluate visual messages and to encode and compose meaningful visual communication (Hattwig, Bussert, & Burgess, 2013). Ideally courses that teach visual literacy should focus not only on the how to use a camera (the means to making visual imagery) but more importantly focus on visual literacy as a context for visual storytelling.

It has become vital that 21st century students, as learners and global citizens, transcend from passive receivers of visual messages in media to active deconstructionist of visual grammar given the exploding technological advances in multimedia. The kind of visual stories our students tell with so many means of production at their fingertips is an important consideration for educators. Is it enough for our students to point and shoot with a cell phone camera? Can these image-makers really "see" as they look at their subjects? Are they able to move beyond a surface or superficial level of understanding? Can they produce visual images that reflect a human element . . . images that have a "soul?"

Visual literacy is essential for 21st century learners and those who teach. It is critical that students develop skills to create and utilize visual grammar to communicate and contribute to a global dialogue. Because most of our students have access to smart phone devises that have camera functionality, the integration of visual literacy into their education becomes paramount. Classrooms can become spaces for students to effectively communicate in and contribute to analytical and global dialogue for discussions of race and diversity, multicultural life and history thus encouraging students to become active deconstructionists of visual grammar.

2. Visual Literacy Defined

Visual literacy can be defined as a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials (acrlvislitstandards, 2011).

A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture. Across disciplines, students engage with images and visual materials throughout the course of their education. Although expected to understand, use, and create images in academic work, students are not always prepared to do so. Scholarly work with images requires research, interpretation, analysis, and evaluation skills specific to visual materials. These abilities cannot be taken for granted and need to be taught, supported, and integrated into the curriculum.

Course objectives often include the development of skills to interpret, translate, construct and apply images as well as image management and presentation. Students become better critical thinkers. They are encouraged to become active deconstructionists of visual grammar, and emerge from these courses with the ability to produce images that effectively communicate messages to audiences, messages that have "a soul." Such as courses have efficacy/impact across disciplines and majors and offer far- reaching benefits to the institution.

3. Learning Outcomes to Consider

Learning outcomes to consider when teaching visual literacy (acrlvislitstandards, 2011) include the following: conducting effective image searches; recognizing how the image search process is affected by image rights and use restrictions; selecting the most appropriate image sources for the current project

Additionally the visually literate student situates the image in cultural, asocial and historical contexts; describes the intended audience for an image; validates interpretation and analysis of images through discourse with others; critiques persuasive or manipulative strategies that may have been used in image production to influence interpretation; evaluates the use of visual signs, symbols; and conventions to convey meaning.

During the production of image the visually literate student should explore choices made in the production of an image to construct meaning or influence interpretation (e.g., framing, composition, included or excluded elements, staging); identify the physical, technical, and design components of an image; examine an image for signs of editing, alteration, or manipulation (e.g., cropping, color correction, image enhancements).

Other learning outcomes include: exploring representations of gender, ethnicity, and other cultural or social identifiers in images; describing the intended audience for an image; validating interpretation and analysis of images through discourse with others; critiquing persuasive or manipulative strategies that may have been used in image production to influence interpretation; evaluating the use of visual signs, symbols, and conventions to convey meaning. Images as "visual texts" assist in revealing perpetual representations and socio-cultural perspectives and can offer students the opportunity to enhance their media literacy, self- reflect, and critically make connections through the use of multiple channels discourse.

4. A Visual Literacy Curriculum

In the curriculum at Clark Atlanta University for the undergraduate course, "*African-American Images in the Media*", visual and media literacy are used as part of the teaching methods and experiences. In this course students explore the characterization and interpretation of the image of African-Americans in media and attempt to qualify their value as a catalyst for social, political, and cultural change.

The course functions to assess the dynamics of basic thought propagated through imagery, positive and negative, in films, television, and other media. Students are assigned analysis course work in which they apply the principles of film analysis to moving image content screened in class and assigned viewings outside of class. Students must synthesize what they've read from assigned readings for the course. They must consider a new outlook on the moving image content after having read the assigned text. This includes: interpreting **visual grammar** and **theme** (the visual content's message(s) and/or meaning(s) communicated by the director). Visual grammar tools include, but are not limited to: Character actions, character wardrobe, locations (props, production design, colors utilized in the content, editing (pacing, relationship of one shot to the next) as well as all camera techniques.

Students are also instructed to pay attention to the cinematic style, conventions and the common themes within the content of the moving image. Some of the common conventions within the content of films and moving image include: Location as character, composed music, choice of cast, directing style and the use of camera shots. Other elements of moving image content students are instructed to consider are: characters' wants and values, characters' physical/visual description, use of language/dialogue, character arc/transformation or lack of transformation.

The "*African American Images in Media*" course takes a critical analysis approach to examining and exploring visual literacy in moving image content. Ultimately students learn to critically analyze and deconstruct depiction of African Americans in films, television, advertising, and within Internet media content. They learn to identify and discover the social, cultural and artistic themes that resonate within media content. Students also derive their own specific insights through both in-class discussions and analysis.

The course provides students with basic tools and skills to critically analyze the social, technical and conceptual aspects of how filmmakers and media makers construct visual imagery that reflect narrative, historical, ideological and cultural landscapes within our world. Students become familiar with the depictions of African Americans from a historical perspective, and they learn to discuss in detail the cultural and aesthetic approach to moving image production. They gain a working knowledge of film vocabulary as well as major theoretical approaches and analytical tools used in decoding film grammar. Analyzing depictions of African American and learning to deconstruct moving image content, ultimately informs the students' own media and film aspirations.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have described the need for classrooms to become spaces for students to effectively communicate in and contribute to the analytical and global dialogue for discussions of race and diversity, multicultural life and history thus encouraging students to become active deconstructionists of visual grammar. Although many courses in the Department of Mass Media Arts and other departments at Clark Atlanta University use some aspect of visual literacy as part of the teaching methodology, the following courses - "Visual Storytelling and Composition" and "Media Activism" - rely heavy on visual literacy course objectives and learning outcomes.

Using multimedia images as "visual texts" assist in revealing perpetual representations and socio-cultural perspectives which offer students the opportunity to enhance their media literacy, self-reflect, and critically make connections through the use of multiple channels of discourse.

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